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EXPECTATIONS OF KAZAKHSTAN PR AGENCIES FOR PR GRADUATES' SKILLS

The study addresses the lack of comprehensive research on whether recent PR graduates in Kazakhstan meet industry requirements. The research aimed to explore PR professionals' satisfaction levels and opinions on the competency of PR graduates, highlighting key issues in PR education in Kazakhstan. Adopting a pragmatic worldview, the study used qualitative methodologies, including document analysis and structured interviews with chief executive officers of PR agencies experienced in hiring entry-level graduates. Findings provide insights into PR agencies' expectations of Kazakhstani universities, specifically addressing the skills needed in the market. Soft skills: PR representatives emphasized responsibility, collaboration, initiative, stress management and time management. Effective communication and collaboration were particularly noted for their impact on customer service outcomes. Technical skills: Essential competencies include data analysis, photo and video production/editing, data management, and search engine optimization (SEO). Professional skills: Key skills identified were copywriting, creating social media content, developing media relations materials, and making informed decisions based on quantitative and qualitative data. However, the study revealed a gap between PR agencies' expectations and the actual skills of entry-level PR graduates. Noted deficiencies included a lack of practical experience and internship opportunities, as well as a shortage of qualified educators with relevant industry experience, contributing to graduates' perceived inadequacies in practical PR skills. The study also explored PR agencies' attitudes toward the ability of Kazakhstani universities to prepare PR graduates. Interview results indicated generally positive attitudes, with confidence in universities' ability to develop technical skills. Collaboration between universities and PR agencies was seen as crucial for producing well-trained PR professionals.

Key words: public relations in Kazakhstan, PR skills, Kazakhstani PR agencies, entry-level PR graduates, PR education in Kazakhstan.

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Қазақстандық PR-агенттіктерінің PR-түлектерінен күтетін кәсіби дағдылары

Бұл зерттеу Қазақстандағы PR-мамандардың, яғни ЖОО түлектерінің осы кәсіби саладағы заманауи талаптарға сәйкес келетіндігі туралы жан-жақты зерттеулердің жоқтығын ескере отырып жасалып отыр. Зерттеу Қазақстандағы PR-білім берудің негізгі проблемаларын баса көрсете отырып, қоғаммен байланыс жөніндегі мамандардың қанағаттану деңгейін және PR-компаниялардың түлектерінің құзыреттілігі туралы пікірлерін зерделеуге бағытталған. Әлемге прагматикалық көзқараспен қарай отырып, зерттеу сапалы әдістемелерді, соның ішінде құжаттарды талдауды және бастапқы деңгейдегі түлектерді жалдау тәжірибесі бар PR агенттіктерінің басшыларымен құрылымдық сұхбаттарды қолданды. Алынған нәтижелер қазақстандық университеттерден PR-агенттіктердің күтетін кәсіби қабілеттері туралы, атап айтқанда, еңбек нарығында қажетті дағдылар туралы түсінік береді.

Қоғаммен байланыс мамандары жауапкершіліктің, ынтымақтастықтың, бастамашылықтың, стрессті және уақытты басқарудың маңыздылығын атап өтті. Тиімді байланыс пен ынтымақтастық клиенттерге қызмет көрсету нәтижелеріне әсері үшін ерекше қажет. Техникалық дағдылар: негізгі құзыреттерге деректерді талдау, фотосуреттер мен бейнелерді өндіру/өңдеу, деректерді басқару және іздеу жүйесін оңтайландыру (SEO) кіреді. Кәсіби дағдылар: негізгі дағдылар копирайтинг, әлеуметтік медиа мазмұнын құру, БАҚ-пен өзара әрекеттесу үшін материалдарды әзірлеу және сандық және сапалық деректерге негізделген шешімдер қабылдау болды. Дегенмен, бұл зерттеу PR агенттіктерінің күтулері мен бастапқы деңгейдегі түлектердің нақты дағдылары арасындағы алшақтықты анықтады. Аталған кемшіліктерге практикалық тәжірибе

тағылымдамадан өту мүмкіндіктерінің болмауы, сондай-ақ тиісті салада тәжірибесі бар білікті оқытушылардың жетіспеушілігі кірді, бұл түлектердің PR саласындағы тәжірибелік дағдыларының жеткіліксіздігіне және қажетті қабілеттерді игеруіне ықпал етті. Зерттеуде авторлар PR-агенттіктердің қазақстандық университеттердің қоғаммен байланыс бойынша түлектерінің дайындау деңгейіне ықпалын зерттеді. Сұхбат нәтижелері студенттердің өз жұмысына жалпы оң көзқараспен қарайтынын және университеттердің техникалық дағдыларды дамыту қабілетіне сенімді екенін көрсетті. Университеттер мен PR агенттіктері арасындағы ынтымақтастық жоғары деңгейде дайындалған қоғаммен байланыс мамандарын даярлау үшін шешуші фактор болып саналады.

Түйін сөздер: Қазақстандағы қоғаммен байланыс, PR дағдылары, қазақстандық PR агенттіктері, бастапқы деңгейдегі PR түлектері, PR білім.

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Ожидания казахстанских PR-агентств от навыков PR-выпускников

Данное исследование направлено на отсутствие всесторонних исследований о том, соответствуют ли недавние выпускники PR-специалистов в Казахстане требованиям отрасли. Цель исследования – изучить уровень удовлетворенности PR-профессионалов и их мнение о компетентности выпускников PR-специальностей, выявить ключевые проблемы PR-образования в Казахстане. Придерживаясь прагматического мировоззрения, в исследовании использовались качественные методики, включая анализ документов и структурированные интервью с генеральными директорами PR-агентств, имеющими опыт найма выпускников начального уровня. Полученные результаты дают представление об ожиданиях PR-агентств от казахстанских университетов, в частности о навыках, необходимых на рынке труда. Мягкие навыки: Представители PR подчеркнули ответственность, сотрудничество, инициативность, управление стрессом и временем. Эффективная коммуникация и сотрудничество были особенно отмечены за их влияние на результаты обслуживания клиентов. Технические навыки: к числу основных компетенций относятся анализ данных, создание/редактирование фото- и видеоматериалов, управление данными и поисковая оптимизация (SEO). Профессиональные навыки: Ключевыми навыками были названы копирайтинг, создание контента для социальных сетей, разработка материалов для связей со СМИ и принятие обоснованных решений на основе количественных и качественных данных. Однако исследование выявило разрыв между ожиданиями PR-агентств и реальными навыками выпускников начального уровня в области PR. Среди недостатков отмечается отсутствие практического опыта и возможностей для стажировки, а также нехватка квалифицированных преподавателей с соответствующим опытом работы в отрасли, что приводит к тому, что выпускники считают, что у них недостаточно практических навыков в области PR. В исследовании также изучалось отношение PR-агентств к способности казахстанских университетов готовить выпускников в области PR. Результаты структурированные интервью показали в целом положительное отношение к этому вопросу, а также уверенность в способности университетов развивать технические навыки. Сотрудничество между университетами и PR-агентствами было признано важнейшим условием подготовки хорошо подготовленных специалистов по связям с общественностью.

Ключевые слова: Казахские связи с общественностью, PR-навыки, Казахские PR-агентства, PR-выпускники, PR-образование в Казахстане.

Introduction

In recent years, most fields that support vital societal functions have experienced significant developmental changes due to increased consumption and high internet penetration. Public relations (PR) is one such field. The primary catalyst for this change was the need to adapt to complex conditions, such as the quarantine imposed due to COVID-19. Although the digitalization of various sectors was already underway before the lockdown, the inability

to leave homes highlighted the critical importance of this process for maintaining global societal functions. Nonetheless, certain elements remain constant over time, such as the skills required to enter the PR field. According to the Annenberg Annual Report [2016], global PR agencies prioritize hiring graduates with skills in writing (89%) and verbal communications (80%).

Statement of the Problem

While media outlet representatives express dissatisfaction with the knowledge and skills of the

new generation, no research has been conducted to determine whether PR graduates meet the industry's requirements. Thus, it is necessary to explore the satisfaction levels of PR representatives and their opinions on the competency of PR graduates, which will, in turn, highlight the main issues in PR education in Kazakhstan.

Background and Rationale

Kazakhstan, a Central Asian country situated between Russia and China, has a relatively small population close to 20 million people despite its vast land area, making it one of the least densely populated countries globally. Kazakhstan has the ninth-largest landmass worldwide, with nearly half of its population (41%) under the age of 25 (United Nations, 2019). According to the Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Art. I), Kazakhstan is a secular democratic republic with a presidential system.

Kazakhstan is the most economically stable post-Soviet country in Central Asia. It transitioned from a lower-middle-income to an upper-middle-income country in less than two decades by 2006 (Rahardja & Agaidarov, 2019). Deloitte Research Center in CIS defined the leading economic sectors of Kazakhstan's economy for 2019 – trade (17%), oil and gas production and processing (15%), and other manufacturing industries (11%). The banking sector comprised 28 banks, with half having foreign stakeholders Deloitte Research Center of in CIS (2019, p. 6].

PR in Kazakhstan

Bekbolatuly and Karaulova (2019) stated that the development of the PR industry in Kazakhstan began in the 1990s after the collapse of the Soviet Union. It emerged due to the development of civil society and the authorities' desire to establish dialogue with citizens. Before the 1990s, information dissemination was vertical and controlled, with media serving as an official means of reducing social tension. Three main industries in Kazakhstan use PR as a tool for reputation creation: the financial and banking sectors, the oil and gas industry, and the IT sector. The establishment of organizations like the National Association for Public Relations in the Republic of Kazakhstan and The Club of Kazakhstani PR experts *PR-shy* marked a turning point.

PR Education in Kazakhstan

Twenty universities in Kazakhstan offer public relations programs, with eleven private and nine public institutions. Half offer both undergraduate and graduate programs. Journalism undergraduate programs are available in thirteen universities, with six offering graduate programs. Instruction is pro-

vided in Kazakh and Russian in eighteen universities, with half offering English instruction. Five universities offer mixed-language instruction, and one offers Turkish instruction.

Purpose of the Study

This study aimed to assess the preparation level of graduates entering the PR market. It qualitatively explores Kazakhstani PR agencies' expectations of universities in preparing graduates and their professional competency in the PR job market.

Materials and methods

This study adopted a pragmatic worldview and methodologies appropriate for its paradigm. As outlined by Creswell (2014), pragmatism emphasizes actions, situations, and outcomes rather than focusing solely on antecedent conditions. Pragmatist researchers prioritize the research problem and employ diverse approaches to achieve a comprehensive understanding. This qualitative study utilized document analysis and structured interviews. Data were collected through structured interviews conducted with chief executive officers of public relations agencies experienced in recruiting entry-level graduates.

Instruments

The study used extensive document analysis systematically reviews and evaluates various information sources. This method involves examining and interpreting data to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and acquire empirical knowledge (Creswell, 2014). It also used structured interviews use an interview schedule with a list of repeated questions in the same order and wording (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These interviews typically include questions with limited answer options, suitable for comparing data across a large sample. However, they can be inflexible and lack depth. In contrast, unstructured interviews allow for improvisation, leading to more natural conversations and unexpected answers. The purpose of the interviews was to assess the competency level of entry-level graduates and evaluate how public relations representatives perceive the universities' ability to prepare future practitioners. Both closed and open questions were used.

The study used purposive sampling, selecting interviewees based on their experience working with or mentoring entry-level practitioners. Participants included 16 representatives from public relations agencies in Almaty and Nur-Sultan, chosen for their experience with entry-level practitioners. Interviewees were contacted via email using a database of Kazakhstani public relations agencies. Interview

questions were sent in advance to ensure clarified responses. Initially constructed in English, the questions were translated into Russian. A pretest was conducted before the main interviews.

Interviewees profile

Sixteen interviewees from Kazakhstani PR agencies participated in the structured interviews. Among the respondents, 5 (31.3%) were owners, 3 (18.8%) were account managers, and 4 (25%) were managing partners and CEOs, respectively. Regarding industry experience, 5 participants (31.3%) had worked in public relations for 10-15 years, 4 (25%) for 5-9 years, 3 (18.8%) for 16-20 years, 2 (12.5%) for over 25 years, and 1 participant (6.3%) had 1-4 and 21-25 years of experience, respectively. In terms of agency size, 6 participants (37.5%) described their agencies as small (10 to 49 employees), 5 (31.3%) as micro (4 to 9 employees), 3 (18.8%) as medium-sized (50 to 249 employees), and 2 respondents (12.5%) as large (250+ employees).

Literature review

The research employed educational standards from various countries and skills requirements from a global perspective. It examined three types of skills—soft, technical, and professional—to assess the development of public relations (PR) education in Kazakhstan and the competencies of its graduates. The literature review is centered on the evolution of PR education in Kazakhstan. The first section discusses studies on the skills needed by entry-level graduates in the global PR market, the second section

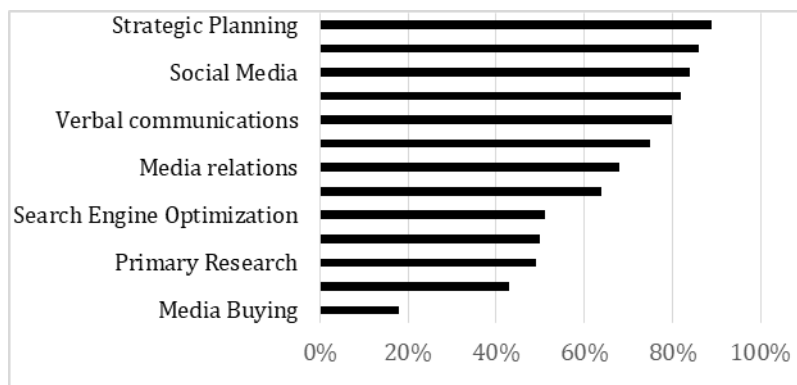
discusses PR in Kazakhstan and the third section focuses on PR education in Kazakhstan.

Skills Required in the Global PR Market

In The Professional Bond (2006), the Commission on Public Relations Education outlines the recommended courses for undergraduate and graduate curricula. It also presents data indicating the essential skills expected of entry-level graduates, as identified by PR educators and practitioners. The 2006 research findings highlight the need for PR professionals with writing skills, critical thinking, and public communication abilities.

The USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2016) in its 2016 Global Communications Report examined the global communications industry, analyzing trends in talent, structure, compensation, and diversity. This report identified the most needed skills indicating writing (89%) and verbal communication skills as more significant than analytics (62%) and SEO (41%). Curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking were also emphasized as crucial skills by industry leaders. The report indicated that writing, verbal communication, and critical thinking remain essential in the PR market over time.

The following year the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2017) presented the findings from a comprehensive survey of over 800 PR executives worldwide in the 2017 Global Communications Report. The report also included insights from nearly 700 PR and communications students. This report highlighted the integration of PR and marketing fields and illustrate the skills deemed significant for the future growth of PR graduates.



(Source: USC Annenberg School of Communications and Journalism, 2017)

In 2019 the PR: Tech the Future of Technology in Communication Report, the USC Annenberg Center for Public Relations (2019), examined the

impact of emerging technologies on the future of the PR industry,” examined the. PR professionals, PR students, and over 200 business leaders in the

United States, representing small, mid-size, and large organizations were surveyed. Social media and online influencers (shared media) took the lead with 38%, slightly surpassing the company's proprietary communication channels (owned media). Traditional media coverage (earned media) was ranked third, with 14% of participants favoring it, while advertising (paid media) was deemed the most valuable communication channel by 12% of respondents.

Technical skills were anticipated to become increasingly important for future communications practitioners. Despite machines handling much of the analysis, there would still be a need for professionals who can translate data into actionable insights. According to the 2019 Report big data ana-

lytics (65%), video production (59%), and search engine optimization (59%) would be critical technical skills for future PR professionals.

The 2017 Fast Forward Report of the Commission on Public Relations Education (2017) offered a comprehensive review of the PR education, including the skills expected from entry-level graduates. The most important skills in PR in 2017 were writing, communication, social media management, research and analytics, and editing. The survey utilized the Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities (KSA) approach, asking practitioners to rate the desirability of specific skills on a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 means not desired and 5 means highly desired).

| Skills | Skills Entry-Level practitioners Should Have (M/SD) | Skills Entry-Level practitioners Do Have (M/SD) |
|-------------------------|---|---|
| Writing | 4.87/.42 | 3.04/0.95 |
| Communication | 4.75/.56 | 3.29/0.89 |
| Social media management | 4.33/0.81 | 3.79/.92 |
| Research & analytics | 4.07/.99 | 2.69/0.94 |
| Editing | 4.16/0.98 | 2.55/0.95 |

(Source: Commission on Public Relations Education, 2017)

Public Relations in Kazakhstan

Bekbolatuly and Karaulova (2019) outlined the development of public relations in Kazakhstan, identifying factors that led to the establishment of the communication field. According to the authors, public relations emerged in Kazakhstan due to the development of civil society and the authorities' desire to engage in dialogue with the population. The socio-political transformations of the 1990s played a significant role in creating a new communication system. During this period, the first PR departments were established in government agencies professional PR tools transformed the relationship between the government and society. Key information and PR activities were centered in the Presidential Administration, the government, both chambers of Parliament, and national companies. Press services, press centers, and public relations centers were also established in regional executive and legislative bodies.

The emergence of PR in Kazakhstan as a professional, applied, and scientific activity was driven by the development of social relations, civil society institutions, and socio-economic market mechanisms. The democratization and transition to a

market economy changed the nature of communications in Kazakhstan. Before the 1990s, information dissemination was vertical and controlled, with the media serving as an official means to reduce social tension. However, post-independence, a new horizontal communication model replaced the vertical one, providing a choice of information sources. The media shifted from reducing social tension to sometimes provoking it. Thus, an organized and systematic introduction of PR services at all levels and training specialists became necessary, coinciding with the democratic transformations and market relations establishment in Kazakhstan. As for the PR education in Kazakhstan, Esenbek (2013) noted that PR services began to be established in 1992. The Al-Farabi Kazakh National University was the first to open an undergraduate program in PR in 2000 and a graduate program in 2009, with over 1,000 graduates (Bykov et al., 2019). However, there were challenges in PR education, such as the lack of local textbooks and training provided by local practitioners.

The development of PR in Kazakhstan mirrors the global (especially American) evolutionary process but on a much shorter timeline. Foreign ex-

perience and adaptation to Kazakhstan's realities played a crucial role in this development. Despite the challenges, PR in Kazakhstan has evolved dynamically, significantly impacting social processes, political culture, the economy, and spiritual life, indicative of the democratization of socio-political processes and the development of civil society institutions.

Kazakhstan's PR has unique features but functions similarly to public relations in the developed countries. Each country's PR practices are adapted to local conditions, reflecting the universality of the public relations system in democratic societies with market economies. Jalalli (2019) found that 86% of PR agencies identified Digital PR (Social Media Management) as the most relevant direction for 2019-2020, followed by crisis communications (80%), media relations (60%), internal communications, and work with influencers (46%). Other areas included corporate social responsibility, content marketing (33%), investor relations (26%), event management (20%), and government relations (13%). Respondents indicated that digital PR and Internet marketing tools, such as social media publications, targeted advertising, and contextual advertising, would be most popular. Offline tools like outdoor advertising and TV/radio advertising were considered less relevant. Integrated promotion, social network work, PR campaign development and implementation, event organizing, and crisis com-

munication services were the most commonly ordered services.

The study also predicted an increase in the Kazakhstan PR market volume by 10-40%, though some respondents expected a decrease. There were varying opinions on the market size, with estimates ranging from less than \$1 million to \$30 million. The majority of respondents did not anticipate budget cuts for outsourced PR services, though some expected reductions. The main challenges identified were limited budgets and the provision of effective PR services. PR is increasingly seen not just as a tool for building company image and reputation but also for increasing sales and awareness.

In another study, Jalalli (2020) examined the global state of public relations and its impact on Kazakhstan's market. A survey by PR Week in early May 2020, revealed that the coronavirus pandemic led to budget cuts and postponed communication campaigns. The Kazakhstani market experienced similar trends, with reduced budgets, personnel changes, and suspended campaigns. However, the pandemic also strengthened certain areas like crisis communications, internal communications, government relations, digital communications, and work with influencers.

These studies highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of public relations in Kazakhstan, emphasizing the need for continued research and development in both practice and education.

Table 1 – Universities of Kazakhstan, teaching Public Relations

| University name | Bachelor program | Master program | Program title | Academic unit | Language of instruction |
|--|------------------|----------------|------------------|--|--------------------------|
| Al-Farabi Kazakh National University | yes | yes | Public Relations | Faculty of Journalism | Kazakh, Russian, English |
| Almaty Management University | yes | no | Public Relations | School of Law and Politics | Kazakh, Russian, English |
| Central Asian University | yes | no | Journalism | Faculty of Education, World Languages and Humanities | Kazakh, Russian, English |
| Ilyas Zhansugurov Zhetysu State University | yes | no | Journalism | Faculty of Humanities | English, Russian, Mixed |
| Innovative University of Eurasia | yes | no | Journalism | Department of Languages, Literature and Journalism | Kazakh, Russian |

Continuation of the table

| University name | Bachelor program | Master program | Program title | Academic unit | Language of instruction |
|--|------------------|----------------|--|--|--------------------------|
| International University of Information Technologies | yes | yes | Business Journalism, SMM and PR/Digital Media and Data Visualization | Department of Media Communications and History of Kazakhstan | Kazakh, Russian, Mixed |
| Karaganda State University named after Academician E.A. Buketov | yes | yes | Public Relations/ Journalism | Philological Faculty | Kazakh, Russian |
| Kazakh University of International Relations and World Languages named after Abylai Khan | yes | yes | Public Relations | Faculty of Management and International Communications | Kazakh, Russian, English |
| KIMEP University | yes | yes | Journalism/ International Journalism | Faculty of Social Sciences | English |
| Kostanay State University named after A. Baytursynov | yes | yes | Journalism | Law and Economics Institute | Kazakh, Russian, Mixed |
| L. N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University | yes | yes | Public Relations | Faculty of Journalism and Politology | Kazakh, Russian |
| M. Kozybayev North-Kazakhstan State University | yes | yes | Journalism | Law, Economics and History Faculty | Kazakh, Russian, English |
| S. Amanzholov East-Kazakhstan State University | yes | no | Journalism | Faculty of History, Philology and International Relations | Kazakh, Russian |
| S. Toraigyrov Pavlodar State University | yes | yes | Journalism | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences | Kazakh, Russian, Mixed |
| Shakarim State University of Semey | yes | no | Journalism | Philological Faculty | Kazakh, Russian, Mixed |
| Süleyman Demirel University | yes | yes | Journalism | Faculty of Law and Humanities | Kazakh, Turkish, English |
| Taraz State University named after M. Dulati | yes | no | Journalism | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences | Kazakh, Russian, English |
| Turan University | yes | yes | Public Relations | Faculty of Law and Humanities | Kazakh, Russian |
| University of Foreign Languages and Business Careers | yes | no | Journalism | Faculty of Pedagogical Sciences | Kazakh, Russian, English |
| University of International Business | yes | no | Journalism | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences | Kazakh, Russian |

Results and Discussion

Results

The interview asked PR practitioners to identify the soft, technical, and professional skills they expect entry-level graduates to develop during their university studies.

Soft skills

Interviewees highlighted three soft skills as the most important for entry-level graduates: responsibility (13 participants, 81.3%), collaboration (12 participants, 75%), and initiative and stress management (9 respondents, 56.3%). Additional responses included “all listed skills are important” and “proactivity”. The motivations behind these choices were primarily based on the “observation” and “experience” of public relations practitioners. Notably, some respondents described graduates as a generation that dislikes routine and stressful conditions, which they believe is a common characteristic of the younger workforce in the public relations field. Most interviewees cited “professional experience” as their main motivation for their choices. However, one participant attributed their motivation to a “generation gap,” explaining

that the current generation lacks patience and disfavors daily routines. According to the evaluation of Kazakhstani universities’ ability to foster soft skills in their students, the majority of respondents (9 interviewees, 56.3%) showed a tendency to “partially agree.” A smaller number of participants (3 interviewees, 18.8%) affirmed their “agreement,” whereas a minority (2 interviewees, 12.5%) expressed “partial disagreement,” “disagreement,” or “complete disagreement.”

The soft skills that a graduate typically lack the most were responsibility, initiative, collaboration, and proactivity. Additionally, the skill of “multitasking” was also suggested.

Technical Skills

Regarding technical skills, more than half (9 interviewees, 56.3%) of respondents identified proficiency in extensive data analysis as the most essential skill for graduates to master. Moreover, “photo and video production and editing” and “data management” were mentioned by 43.8% (7 interviewees) of PR practitioners, while “search engine optimization” was highlighted by 37.5% (6 interviewees).

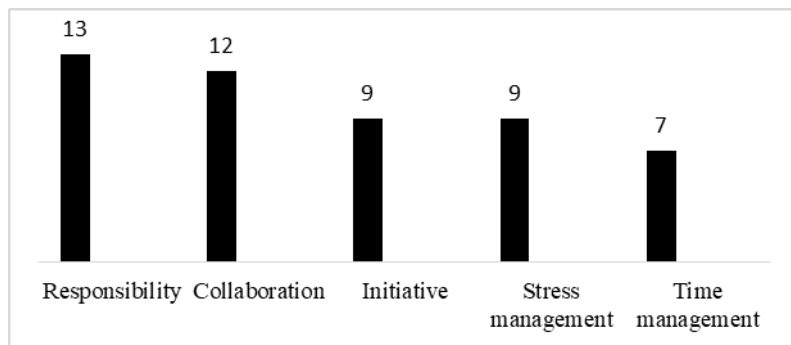


Figure 1 – Preferable soft skills by Kazakhstani PR agencies

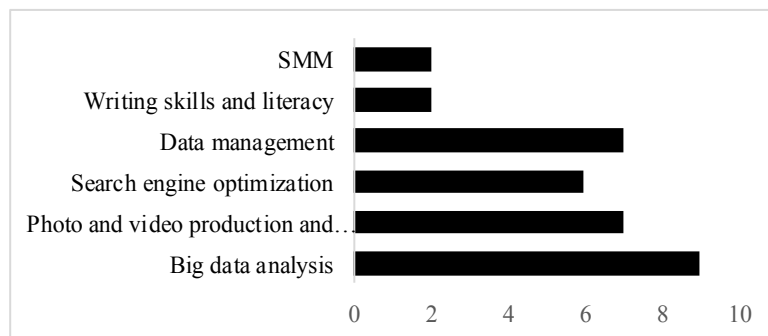


Figure 2 – Preferable technical skills by PR agencies

On the contrary, 56% of respondents find it somewhat true that Kazakhstani universities effectively educate graduates to develop their technical skills. Additionally, 12.5% of participants each indicated “True of what I believe” and “Somewhat untrue of what I believe,” as depicted in Figure 4.

Professional Skills

The interview also explored the professional skills prioritized by PR agencies. The top three professional skills identified were “copywriting” (68.8%; 11 participants), “creating social media content” (56.3%; 9 participants), “developing media relations materials” (37.5%; 6 participants), and “making informed decisions based on quantitative and qualitative data” (37.5%; 6 participants). The majority of respondents justified their choices based on “professional experience” and “client demands.” However, one participant provided a detailed perspective: “Content creation skills are essential for PR professionals, yet few graduates possess proficient copywriting and content analysis abilities. Swift data retrieval and adaptation to client requests are critical.”

In contrast to soft skills, respondents exhibited a higher level of confidence in Kazakhstani universities' capacity to enhance students' technical skills. 43.8% of respondents believed it was “Somewhat true of what I believe,” while 18.8% considered it “True of what I believe.” Additionally, 12.5% expressed “Somewhat untrue of what I believe” and “Untrue of what I believe.” Unfortunately, universities inadequately prepare students for entering the PR market.

Areas of Theoretical Knowledge

The interview further explored the expected areas of theoretical knowledge for Entry-Level Grad-

uates. The top three expected areas were: “Public relations or mass media theories and models” (93.8%; 15 participants), “Social media theories and models” (68.8%; 11 respondents), and “Business and management theories and models” (62.5%; 10 participants). The data are illustrated in Figure 7.

Participants justified their responses citing “professional experience” and “experience with young professionals.” Unique responses included: “A PR specialist must have a robust theoretical foundation to facilitate continuous learning and a broad perspective to devise optimal solutions and strategies for clients,” and “While practical experience is crucial, theoretical knowledge is essential for career and managerial skill development.”

Considering the importance of theories in developing effective communication experts in the Kazakhstani PR market, most respondents held positive views. 37.5% believed it was “True of what I believe,” and 25% indicated it was “Very true of what I believe” or “Somewhat true of what I believe.” Furthermore, participants elucidated their reasons for prioritizing applied theories in professional practice in Kazakhstan. Responses included: “Not every practitioner possesses theoretical knowledge, impacting the quality of strategic communication documents they create,” “Unfortunately, our market lacks specialists with appropriate education in this field. While communication is predominantly practical, theoretical knowledge provides a foundational understanding,” and “Theoretical knowledge, coupled with industry trends, enhances one’s positioning as a specialist, facilitates client negotiations, strategic brand development, and justifies recommendations while anticipating industry evolution.”

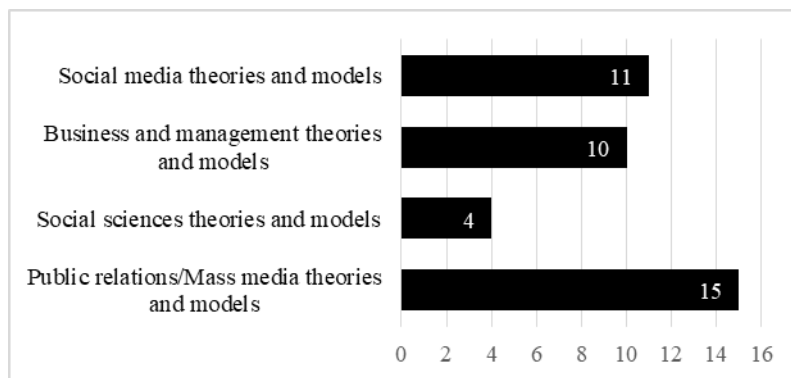


Figure 3 – Theories PR graduates are expected understand

Graduates from other fields meeting PR profession needs in Kazakhstan

Participants in the interview were asked to identify areas in which graduates from other fields could contribute specialized expertise to the PR profession in Kazakhstan. The most frequently chosen areas were: Marketing and advertising (81.3%; 13 participants), Business administration (43.8%; 7 participants), and IT and Engineering (31.3%; 5 participants).

Participants primarily justified their choices based on their professional experience. However, one participant provided a unique response: “In addition to marketing knowledge, specialists need a grasp of general business processes: communication, business correspondence, and stages of en-

gagement (contract, execution, accounting documents).”

Regarding the necessity of Entry-Level Graduates from other fields, the majority of responses were positive. 50% of participants believed it was “Somewhat true of what I believe,” and 31.3% considered it “True of what I believe.” “Somewhat untrue of what I believe” and “Very untrue of what I believe” were less common at 12.5% and 6.3%, respectively. Figure 10 displays these results.

Furthermore, participants were asked to explain how entry-level graduates from other fields contribute to the growth of their communications agency. Some respondents noted that graduates from other fields fulfill their need for specialized expertise and assist with technical aspects of the work.

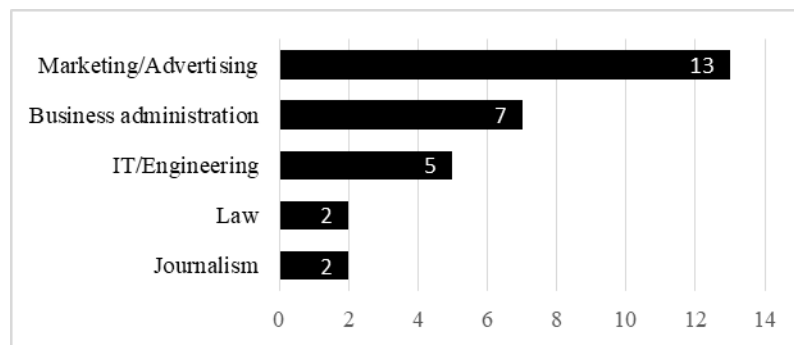


Figure 4 – Needed specialized expertise of the PR profession in Kazakhstan

Specialized Applied Knowledge

Participants in the interview were queried about their views on the specialized applied knowledge expected from Entry-Level Graduates in Journalism or Public Relations. The most promising areas identified were: Persuasion and Negotiation (81.3%; 13 participants), Social listening and analytics (62.5%; 10 participants), Business acumen and savvy (50%; 8 participants), and Client management (50%; 8 participants). Participants predominantly justified their selections based on their professional experience. Regarding the understanding of Kazakhstani universities’ requirements for specialized knowledge in the PR market, respondents’ views were less definitive. 31% of participants believed it was “Somewhat true of what I believe,” and the same percentage indicated “Untrue of what I believe”. Additionally, 25% of respondents considered it “Very untrue of what I believe”. Figure 12 presents these results. The interview also explored which areas Entry-Level

graduates need to expand their practical knowledge to meet the demands of the PR profession in Kazakhstan. Primary responses included “computer literacy” and “digital marketing and communications”.

Respondents were asked to select the most anticipated abilities to be developed by Entry-Level Graduates. Consequently, the following abilities were identified as the most favored ones: Creative thinking (62.5%; 10 participants), Analytical thinking (56.3%; 9 participants), and Solution finding (50%; 8 participants). Figure 13 depicts these findings. Participants primarily justified their choices based on their professional experience.

Furthermore, participants were also queried about their level of confidence regarding Kazakhstani universities’ capacity to enhance these abilities. 56.3% (9 participants) rated it as “Somewhat true of what I believe”, while 18.8% rated it as “True of what I believe”. “Very untrue of what I believe” and “Untrue of what I believe” received

lower endorsements, at 12.5% each. Participants also characterized the cognitive approach of Entry-Level Graduates as predominantly “surface think-

ing”. Moreover, the effectiveness of graduates’ performance was assessed as “low”, impacting work quality and meeting deadlines.

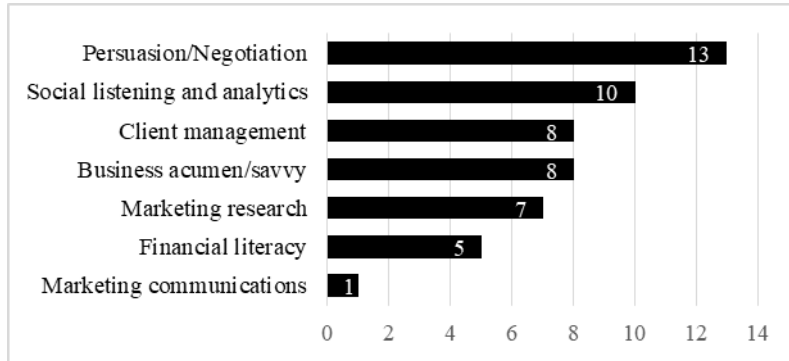


Figure 5 – Specialized knowledge expected from Journalism/Public Relations entry-level graduates

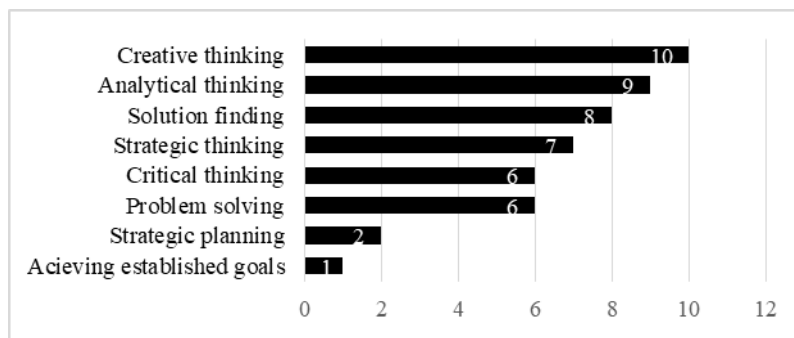


Figure 6 – Expected abilities from entry-level PR graduates

The interview also investigated the initial roles of Entry-Level Graduates within their communications agencies. 87% (14 participants) described these roles as “assistant”, while 12.5% (2 participants) identified them as “account manager”. Public relations supervisors expressed a moderate level of satisfaction with the professional competencies with which universities in Kazakhstan prepare their graduates.

Discussion

This qualitative study aimed to explore Kazakhstani PR agencies’ expectations regarding the professional competency of Entry-Level (EL) PR graduates and their readiness to enter the market. Additionally, it sought to assess industry representatives’ perceptions of Kazakhstani universities’ capability to prepare future PR practitioners.

Findings from document analysis and interviews suggest several insights into PR agencies’ expectations from Kazakhstani universities, answered the first research question What soft, technical, and professional skills do PR agencies expect entry-level PR graduates to have? PR agencies prioritize the development of specific skills they deem essential in the current job market:

- *Soft Skills:* PR representatives highlighted responsibility, collaboration, initiative, stress management, and time management as crucial soft skills. Effective communication and collaboration are particularly emphasized, influencing customer service outcomes.

- *Technical Skills:* Key technical competencies identified include extensive data analysis, photo and video production/editing, data management, and search engine optimization (SEO). These findings align closely with a survey by USC Annenberg

Center for Public Relations (2019), underscoring the industry's demand for digital skills and the ability to derive actionable insights from data.

- *Professional Skills*: Essential professional skills identified include copywriting, creating social media content, developing media relations materials, and making informed decisions based on quantitative and qualitative data.

The study also answered the second research question What attitudes do Kazakhstani agencies hold regarding the ability of universities to prepare PR graduates for the job market? Interview results indicate generally positive attitudes among PR agencies towards Kazakhstani universities' capacity to equip PR graduates with necessary soft, technical, and professional skills. Respondents expressed confidence in universities' ability to develop technical skills in their students. Collaboration between universities and PR agencies is seen as crucial to producing well-trained PR professionals, benefiting both sectors. However, most of the interviewees indicated an existing gap between PR agencies' expectations and the actual skills of EL PR graduates, the study reveals deficiencies in practical experience and internship opportunities during students' education. Participants also noted a lack of qualified edu-

cators with relevant industry experience, contributing to graduates' perceived inadequacies in practical PR skills.

Conclusion

The study revealed a gap between PR agencies' expectations and the actual skills of entry-level PR graduates. Noted deficiencies included a lack of practical experience and internship opportunities, as well as a shortage of qualified educators with relevant industry experience, contributing to graduates' perceived inadequacies in practical PR skills. The study also explored PR agencies' attitudes toward the ability of Kazakhstani universities to prepare PR graduates. Interview results indicated generally positive attitudes, with confidence in universities' ability to develop technical skills. Collaboration between universities and PR agencies was seen as crucial for producing well-trained PR professionals.

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